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SUBJECT: MFA MIDDLE EAST DG RAGAGLINI ON SYRIA AND IRAN

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Elizabeth Dibble for reasons 1.4
(b),(d).

11. (C) Summary. During a September 16 courtesy call by Political M/C MFA DG for the Middle East Cesare Ragaglini said Syrian FM al-Moallem surprised the Italians during his September 11 visit by appearing to condition movement on delineating the Syrian-Lebanese border on prior progress on the Golan. Ragaglini said al-Moallem, who exuded confidence about both indirect talks with Israel, as well as the prospects for eventual US-mediated talks, reiterated Asad's commitment to the exchange of diplomats with Lebanon by the end of 2008. He suggested that Rome felt the door to high-level engagement with Damascus had been swung wide open by French President Sarkozy's trip to Damascus, and argued for greater US/EU engagement with the SARG, as one way to peel off Syrian support for Iran. On the latter, Ragaglini complained of being consulted late on a common approach to handling an IAEA board resolution condemning Iran, and cautioned that Russia and China could well block any efforts in Vienna, which would redound disastrously on plans for a fourth UNSCR. Ragaglini, like other GOI interlocutors we have spoken to recently, assessed the Iranian refusal of the July P5 1 package the result of colliding U.S. and Iranian presidential electoral calendars. End Summary.

Syrian Visit Presages More Italian Engagement

12. (C) Commenting on the September 11 visit to Rome by Syrian FM al-Moallem, Ragaglini said the latter exuded SARG confidence, telling FM Frattini that the Israelis were slowly but surely internalizing the requirement to return the Golan. Al-Moallem was not fazed by the potential for the current turmoil in Israeli internal politic derailing indirect talks, and signaled that in any case the SARG assumed a change of administration would open the way to a return to U.S.-mediated direct talks with Israel. Ragaglini said Moallem conveyed the sense that Damascus "would not do anything" with Washington at this point, preferring to wait until January 2009. Ragaglini took the point that in this the Syrians were underestimating the degree of policy continuity from one U.S. administration to another.

13. (C) Elaborating on the reasons for the visit, Ragaglini noted that the recently signed agreement between the Syrian and Italian Foreign Ministers to hold "permanent consultations" was a "natural" step that Italy would make in order to further develop the relationship between the two countries (note: alluding to the economic ties). Suggesting that French President Sarkozy's exchange of visits with Bashar Al-Asad had swung wide the diplomatic door for EU engagement with Damascus, Ragaglini argued for deeper US/EU efforts in that direction as inducements for better behavior.

When pushed on what specific improvements in Syria's behavior Italy had seen in its own high-level diplomacy, (note: which preceded French "rehabilitation" of Asad) Ragaglini acknowledged Rome had nothing to show for its work, saying that Italy alone, and even the EU, could not bring Damascus along, only the U.S. could. (Comment: Berlusconi's Deputy National Security Advisor separately told the DCM that the GOI had turned down an al-Moallem request to meet with PM Berlusconi, to keep the visit "in proportion.")

Golan Conditionality on Border Demarcation?

14. (C) Commenting that al-Moallem had reiterated Asad's pledge to exchange diplomats with Lebanon by the end of 2008, Ragaglini noted that the GOI was taken off-guard by al-Moallem seeming to condition commencement of border demarcation efforts on progress in Israeli-Syrian discussion on the Golan.

Damascus "Fully Expects" Moscow to Make Good on Arms Commitments

15. (C) In contrast to what he understood the Syrians had told the French recently, Ragaglini said Moallem asserted that Damascus "fully expects" Moscow to make good on its arms commitments, an apparent reference to rumors of quid-pro-quo discussion between the Russians and Israelis on sales to Georgia.

Italy Unclear on Way Forward with Iran

16. (C) Noting with some asperity that Italy "had just received" a UK draft resolution (apparently for next week's

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IAEA Board meeting), Ragaglini again stressed Italy's interest in playing a role within the P5 1, as well as receive more timely consultations within the Quint process. While the GOI did not yet have a read of the Russian and Chinese positions, he voiced concern that the latter would be unwilling to support a tough resolution in Vienna. He cautioned against what he termed was the French desire for "hasty actions" on a resolution, noting that failure in Vienna could be damning for our aims for a fourth UNSCR. While Ragaglini voiced continuing GOI support for Washington's approach on Iran, he questioned how much further progress we could collectively make with sanctions. He admitted, however, that he had no alternatives to offer to the current course, terming the Iranians exceptionally difficult to read, and even harder to influence.

17. (C) Commenting on Iran's failure to accept the July P5 1 package, Ragaglini said he had heard that nonetheless Iranian officials continued to question French and German officials about details of the package. Noting the onset of the Iranian presidential race, he commented that in the end perhaps no official could embrace the package "without knowing where it all might end." He lamented (as have other Italian officials here recently) that Iran had not grabbed the opportunity before it, and recalled he had made the same point bluntly with then-deputy FM Saeed Jalili in the fall of 2006, telling Jalili that Tehran had bungled in not taking up Secretary Rice's offer to engage, within the P5 1. He ended by saying that, like the Syrians, Iranian officials were looking past the current U.S. administration to the next, but that in any case, U.S. and Iranian presidential electoral calendars were working at cross-purposes at this point.

18. (C) Comment: While Ragaglini peddled dialogue with Iran and Syria at various points in the conversation, he applied a considerably lighter touch than when we last met with Department officials in Washington, during the final months of the Prodi government. He is out of step with FM Frattini in particular, who is said to have put out the word to find him an onward assignment.

